CONCLUSION

Ethnicity remains the most potent force in Malaysia even if of late its influence has been somewhat adulterated by other social stratification forces, principally class and gender. The potency of ethnicity lies in its ability to combine both affective and instrumental appeals. As members of distinct and self-conscious cultural communities, Malays, Chinese and Indians naturally were inclined to identify with and treasure their respective languages, cultures and religions, and thus actively strived to preserve and propagate them. Since they share a common pool of generalized symbols and values, the ethnic members would primarily socialize and associate with their own. Ethnicity thus continues to constitute an integral constituent of the individual Malaysia psyche and ethnic membership critically demarcates his/her social life and taste. It follows that the effectiveness of affective appeals originates from the evident passionate attachments to a particular ethnicity that continue to sway individual identification and pattern of social life.

Rapid economic growth throughout the 1970s accompanied by the redistributive effects of the New Economic Policy had created a substantial ethnically mixed middle class in Malaysia. A sin many other countries, this development were associated with the emergence of an active civil society, much of which attempted to eschew the predominating ethnic discourse of existing organizations. However despite being galvanization around secular issues on many occasions, the development of civil society itself is affected by the ethnic nature of the Malaysian Society.

Passionate attachments are readily excited for the purposes of galvanizing ethnic individuals to preserve, protect and promote their culture, language, and religion. Historically, in Malaysia, the affective appeals also became intimately intertwined with the instrumental pursuit of political and economic goals that aimed to manipulate the system and distribution of rewards in preference of the particular ethnic members. Consequently, because ethnicity combines “an interest with an affective tie”, ethnic groups were more effective and successful than social classes in mobilizing their members in pursuit of collective ends in Malaysia. In post-independent Malaysia, ethnic relations became entangled and influence by the rival
ethnic communities’ struggle over the cultural constituents of national identity, the share of political power, and the distribution of economic wealth.

In the Western European experience, the process of nation building was preceded by or coincided with the cultural process of collective identity formation that was grounded in ethnicity. If and when ethnicity formed the basis of nationality, the construction of a national culture/identity almost always would be based on the dominant ethnic group’s culture with the concurrent marginalization, and usually annihilation, of the minority ethnic groups’ cultures. In most of the Western European nations, assimilation of the minority ethnic groups into the dominant ethnic group culture became the normative historical experience. In the colonial world, the conflated conception of nationalism powerfully captured the imaginations of most of the national liberation movements. Inspired by the image of a homogenous cultural nation led to efforts by the dominant ethnic groups in the postcolonial world to fashion national cultures out of their own. A result of this was the proliferation of assimilations policies in many of the postcolonial nation states. But, given the multietnic character of nearly all the postcolonial nation-states, the imposition of assimilationist policies regularly resulted in accentuating the relations between the dominant and minority ethnic groups.

Although Malaysia is an exception to the rule in terms of not pursuing an outright assimilationist policy, the Malays, nevertheless, persisted on the construction of a national culture founded on their culture. The unequal relation between the Malay and non-Malay cultures was formally recognized and written into the 1957 Constitution. This was a radical departure from the colonial period where no one ethnic group’s culture was given privileged status and there was no conception of a common national culture. The colonial state moreover practiced an essentially nonintervention policy in the cultural development of the colony and each ethnic group had equal access to and could freely practice their culture in the colonial public space. The postcolonial state played, in contrast, an increasingly interventionist role in the cultural development of the society and actively promoted the public presence of Malay culture.
In post-independent Malaysia, the site of cultural contentions was centered over the status and place of the different ethnic groups' cultures in the public space. To construct a national culture founded on Malay culture necessary would mean the construction of a public space where Malay culture is omnipresence with the non-Malay cultures relegated to the periphery. However, to advance the Malay cultural symbols and Islam in the public space, the state would have to roll back the historically expansive presence of non-Malay cultural symbols in the public space in general and in the urban space in particular. Constitutionally, since the assimilationist notion was abandoned in Malaysia, the predicament was how to advance Malay cultural dominance without alienating the non-Malay communities and violating their rights to practice and to propagate their cultures as guaranteed in the constitution. In short, the ambivalence around the inclusion and exclusion of the non-Malays' cultures constitutes the key predicament in the construction of the modern Malaysian nation.

In the 1960s, the cultural terrain was a fiercely contested arena. This was because, during this period, the majority of Malays and non-Malays held diametrically opposing stances on the cultural, religion and language issues. On the one side, the popular Malay opinion strongly backed the dominant and privileged position of Malay culture in the new nation and expected the state to uphold and promote Malay culture and the official status of Malay language. Consequently, the perceived slow progress made by the state in advancing Malay culture and language led to increasing numbers of Malays, especially the Malay cultural nationalists, to become disenchanted with the United Malays National Organization (UMNO) leaders. On the other side, the majority of Chinese vigorously and persistently advocated the equality of status for every culture in the society; Mandarin as one of the official languages, equal treatment of Chinese culture and religion, and equal recognition of and rights to education in their mother tongue. The Chinese demand for complete equality was powerfully captured in the notion of a "Malaysian Malaysia". The heated cultural contentions considerably envenomed the ethnic relations in the 1960s.

In the immediate aftermath of the 1969 ethnic riots, the Malay-dominated state proceeded, aggressively, to reconstitute the public cultural landscape. The National Culture Policy was implemented in 1971 to amplify the symbolic presence of Malay culture and Islam in the public space. Also in 1971, the National Education Policy was executed to incrementally make Malay language as the medium of instruction at
all educational levels. Indeed, after 1969, the preeminence of Malay culture in the society became a non-negotiable proposition, and questioning it could result in prosecution under the Sedition Act. Conversely, the pro-Malay cultural policies put the non-Malay communities on the defensive and prodded them to safeguard their cultural presence in and access to the public space. In particular, when the state imposed increasing regulations and restrictions on their rights to stage public cultural performances or to acquire land to build Chinese schools and places of worship and burial, it induced the Chinese to mobilize to defend and struggle for their cultural space and rights.

The impact of the state cultural policies on the ethnic relations over the years depends on several factors. One factor is connected to what were the prevailing conception of Malay culture and the elements of the non-Malay ethnic cultures that could go into the national culture. Another factor has to do with the specific cultural policies formulated and the manner the Malay-dominated state had pursued them. They varying responses of the Malay and Chinese groupings to the state cultural policies constitute another important factor. In the 1970s, pressures from the Malay cultural nationalists pushed the state to strive aggressively to enlarge the presence and function of Malay cultural symbols in the official and public spaces. Since the 1980s, however, pressures from the resurgence of Islam among the Malays led the state to introduce more measures to enhance the “Islamicization” of the society. Simply put, the state allocated funds and established institutions to research on and propagates Malay arts and cultures, altering them where necessary to fit current ideological and religious sensibilities. From the minority community’s perceptive; the cultural policies pursued in Malaysia have oscillated from almost intolerantly “assimilationist” to reasonably accommodating.

Broadly speaking, the impact of the state’s cultural policies and regulations on the relations between the Malay and minority communities could be divided into two periods. Between 1971-1990, the cultural relations between the state, thus Malays, and the minorities were fraught with tensions. Since 1990, however, the cultural relations between the rival communities have turned markedly calm.
Pressured by the cultural nationalists in the 1970s and then by the Islamic resurgence in the 1980s, the state implemented various policies and projects to advance the presence of Malay cultural and Islamic symbols in the public space. In order to expand the public presence of Malay cultural and Islamic symbols and practices, the state inadvertently encroached into spaces originally occupied by the minority cultural and religious symbols and practices. The public standing of minority culture became subjected to varying government regulations and control. Thus, the public display of a number of Chinese cultural and religious symbols was strongly discouraged, and gradually marginalized, by the state. In short, with the advent of the 1971 National Cultural Policy, minority culture lost much of its historical relative autonomy. This generated many anxieties among the minorities about the future of their culture in the country. The cultural conflicts were especially heated in areas where there were large concentrations of minorities, especially in the urban areas. In fact, in the urban areas, the increasing Malay migration from the rural areas further heightened the Malay demands to “Malayize” the urban environment.

While in the 1970s the state cultural policies were most influenced by the Malay cultural nationalists, in the 1980s the state became more pressured by the “Malay Islamic nationalists”. The pressure on the state to be more Islamic was largely due to the opposition Malay party, Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), turning to using Islam as its main means to critique the state and to win the Malay votes. Partly to contain and counter the increasing influence of Islam among the Malays, the state expanded its Islamicization policy. The co-option of Anwar Ibrahim in 1981, then the leading Islamic youth leader, into the UMNO and Government was part of the state’s strategy to win over the more Islamic segment of the Malay community. The impact of the state Islamicization policy generated unease and anxieties among the non-Muslim population in general and the Chinese in particular. This was because as part of the expanded Islamicization, certain Chinese practices and symbols deemed offensive to the Muslims were either eliminated from or confined to the periphery of the public space. For example, in certain wet markets, the selling of pork was either banned outright or, if allowed to be sold, they were confined to spaces hidden from the public.
It was the conflict over the places of worship that best illustrate the particular conflict between the Malay-dominated state and the non-Malay community arising from the state attempts to Islamicize the public environment. As part of its Islamicization policy, the state allocation for building mosques throughout the peninsular increased significantly in the 1980s; as at December 1999 there were 4735 mosques in the peninsular. In contrast, not only non-Muslims efforts to build churches and temples usually did not receive funding from state, but, instead, local councils almost always refused to give permit to the non-Muslims to purchase lands to build new places of worship.

Between 1971-1990 then, the enforcement of the 1971 National Cultural and Educational Policies generated many tensions in the relations between the Malay dominated state and minority community. On the one hand, the Malay-dominated state took aggressive efforts and steps to raise the presence of Malay culture, religion and language in the public space. The Malay language was gradually made the medium of instruction at all educational levels, and Malay cultural institutions and symbols received generous state support and funding from the public coffers. On the other hand, the state’s perceived prejudiced policies toward minority education and culture generated much resentment among the minority communities. Ethnic anxieties were further worsened in the 1980s as a result of the state expansion of its Islamicization policy as a means to retain the support of the Malay community. Fortunately, in the 1990s, the cultural contentions between the Malays and non-Malays have turned remarkably calm, even cordial.

In fact, for pragmatic reasons, there is a growing recognition among the Malay elites to regard the multiethnic character of the Malaysian society as an attractive advantage and asset in an increasingly globalized world in general and the increasing importance of China and India as a growing economic power in particular. This change in perception has directly benefited Chinese culture and education in the country. For instance, the state has, more or less, permitted the non-Malay symbols and language to have reasonable access, and even presence, in the public space.

Finally, although the state has significantly moderated down its Islamicization policies, the question of the place of Islam in the society poses the most complicated
predicament. One factor is because UMNO's arch rival PAS continues to use a rather conservative version of Islam as its primary means to win support from the Malay community. A second factor is because, since the late 1970s, Islam has gradually become the defining source of the Malay personal and, thus, collective identity. The Malay-dominated state hence is pressured to act, or at least portray itself as, Islamic in its competition with PAS for the Malay community support. Thus, both UMNO and PAS have resorted to enforcing more Islamic practices upon directly the Muslims and indirectly the non-Muslims. As such, further expansion of the Islamicization policies would only generate more anxieties among and alienate the non-Muslims, and probably the moderate Malay Muslims as well.

In the end, the cultural negotiations between the rival ethnic communities remain an on-going process. The two most important factors that would affect the cultural negotiations in the future are the fluidity of Malay identities and its impact on the non-Malays' cultures and the globalization of Malaysian society. In terms of the former, the question is how the changing identification with Islam among the Malays will influence the cultural negotiations in the future. In terms of the latter, the question is how the Malaysian society, the Malay community in particular, will respond to the cultural challenges posed by the globalization process.

More often than not, an individual feels a sense of personal deprivation when one feels that one is receiving less than what one desires and deserves. In Malaysia, the economic inequality between the ethnic groups and the prevalence of ethnic stratification and mobilization transformed the personal sense of deprivation into an ethnic collective sense of relative deprivation. This ethnic collective sense of relative economic deprivation was moreover circumscribed by the prevailing discourse that perceived and constructed inequality in the society in predominantly ethnic terms. Malays, hence, routinely compare what they have, what they think they deserve or are entitled to with the other ethnic groups, particularly the Chinese. Accordingly, the Malay-dominated state classified and presented the official data on income and employment pattern in the society in primarily ethnic categories. The Malays' sense of relative deprivation furthermore became inextricably intertwined with the bumiputraism doctrine and the desire to enhance their group worth. The bumiputraism doctrine sanctioned the view that Malays have special privileged access to a
determinate share of the economy because Malaysia is their homeland and thus they are its rightful owner. The notion of group worth is a psychological construct rooted in the human requirement that feeling worthy is a fundamental human need. Since one's sense of self-esteem is intimately linked to the social recognition of one's social group, then the systematic denigrative evaluation of one's group would raise doubts in oneself as a being whose characteristic traits and abilities are worthy of esteem. In Malaysia, Malays' experience of personal and collective disrespect because they belong to a "backward" group raised the normative goal of securing group recognition into a powerful driving moral force. Thus, for Malays, their striving for economic parity with the Chinese embodied both material and affective elements.

After independence, due to their historical exclusion from full participation in the economic development of the country, a shared sense of relative deprivation rapidly emerged among the Malays. By the mid-1960s, Malay feelings of being economically deprived had intensified noticeably, especially among the upwardly ambitious Malay civil servants and petty businessmen. The emerging Malay sentiment felt that circumstances were not providing the opportunities and benefits to which Malays were justly entitled as bumiputras. After an exceptionally racially charged general election campaign, the worsening ethnic relations deteriorated into the ethnic riots on May 13, 1969. While the ethnic riots could be attributed to a number causes, and missteps taken by the authorities, it was the shared sense of economic deprivation that evidently influenced the Malay political elites and intelligentsia to single out the ethnic inequality factor. Indeed, since then, Malay economic backwardness was regularly used to buttress the argument that for Malaysia to enjoy stability and progress in ethnic relations in the future would require narrowing and rectifying the economic imbalances between the ethnic groups. Economic restructuring along ethnic lines was thus included as one of the two objectives of the New Economic Policy (NEP) which was implemented from 1971-90 (Second Malaysian Plan 1971-75; Mid-Term Review of the Second Malaysian Plan1971-75). The elimination of ethnicity with economic functions was to accomplished through the implementation of preferential policies that benefit Malays disproportionately. In social stratification terms, the ethnic restructuring aim to make social classes more multiethnic. Two realities, one economic and the other political, shaped the strategy eventually adopted to redress the ethnic inequality. Economically,
the political leaders were cognizant of the distributive limits of the then predominantly agricultural-based economy. Politically, the prevailing consociational politics would eschew any uncompromising means to narrowing the inequality gap. Awareness of the limited economic pie and impelled by the consociational politics led the political leaders to adopt a gradualist strategy to increase Malay economic participation. The gradualist strategy would incrementally uplift the Malay wellbeing such that it would not unduly overburden the non-Malays nor discourage the investments, especially foreign, needed to spur economic growth.

In practice, however, the poverty eradication policy deviated from its purported ethnic-blind objective. Given that rural poverty constituted the overwhelming majority of the poor, it was natural that most poverty eradication programs targeted the rural poor. But because inequality was predominantly constructed in ethnic terms, poverty became identified primarily with rural Malay poverty. This led to the formulation and implementation of poverty eradication programs that largely only benefited the rural Malay poor. The non-Malay poor hence were largely neglected in the government poverty eradication policies and were left to fend by themselves. For example, Indian estate workers and Chinese New Villagers in the rural areas have received barely any direct assistance from the government over the years. More importantly, the Orang Asli groups were neglected even though they are bumiputras and theoretically should have benefited disproportionately from the NEP. Needless to say, the majority of Malays and Chinese had diametrically opposing feelings about the NEP. While Malays across all classes generally supported the NEP and welcomed the preferential steps taken to increase their community's share of the wealth and economic participation, the Chinese, in contrast, strongly felt that the NEP discriminated against them.

The rationale behind the collective sense of relative deprivation is the subjective experience of the group comparing what they have to what they believe they deserve or are entitled to. In so far as the majority of Malay individuals continue to identify with their community's feeling that there is an unacceptable gap between what they have and what they believe they deserve and are entitled to, an ethnic shared sense of relative deprivation will persists. It follows that the emerging Malay criticisms of corruption and cronyism must not be interpreted to mean a
rejection of the preferential policies, but, rather, simply mean growing Malay resentments over the way the preferential policies have been used to benefit a few. Indeed, there is a growing Malay support for a larger share of the economic pie. Moreover, entrenched material and affective interests would ensure continual Malay support for preferential policies that benefit them disproportionately. The preferential policies that continue to discriminate Malaysians based on the color of their skin will remain a thorn in the relations between the rival ethnic communities.

Since 1990 then, the ethnic relations in Malaysia have been remarkably stable and even congenial. The rapid economic growth has enabled the state to pursue its ethnic redistributive policy without unduly overburdening the non-Malays. In the cultural arena, the state has relaxed its pro-Malay policy while allowing the other culture more access and room in the public space. In general, out right conflicts have been avoided because both the rival ethnic communities were willing to give concessions and the economic inequality gap has discernibly narrowed between the Malays and non-Malays. Indeed, the ruling coalition party won an unprecedented victory at the polls in 1995, with substantial support from the Chinese community for the first time.

The question, then, is the prospects of the ethnic relations in the future. In the economic sphere, given the entrenched interests and the institutionalization of the pro-Malay policies, coupled with continued prevalence of the ethnic sense of relative deprivations, it would be extremely difficult for the state to reverse its ethnic-based formula without a backlash. Since growth will eventually slows down as the economy approaches maturity, it will become increasingly difficult for the state to maintain the existing pro-Malay policies without unduly overburdening the non-Malays. Perhaps, at some point down the road, when a reasonable ethnic economic parity has been realized the UMNO will have to convince itself and the Malay community that the pro-Malay redistributive policy be replaced with an income based policy. If at that time the bulk of the poor continue to be Malays, then they would constitute the majority of those who would receive help from the government. The middle and upper Malay social classes, regardless of ethnicity, by and large should fend for themselves. In the cultural arena, the biggest challenge to the stability of ethnic relations is the interrelated issue of how Islam will reconfigures the Malay identity as
the community confronts modernity and how the state will respond to the Islamic reconfiguration of Malay identity. The non-Malays would naturally be anxious of any moves by the state to further Islamicized the society. Perhaps, the continuing integration of Malaysia into the global society will encourage the state to maintain a more liberal and open cultural policy. In general then, ethnic relations in Malaysia have been relatively congenial precisely because extremism and intolerance, factors that can undermine the stability of society, have been soundly contained in Malaysian society. Nevertheless, one must remember that when ethnic members are besieged by a sudden wave of anxieties and frustrations, they could become susceptible to extremists' ranting. And ethnic members become highly susceptible to extremists’ ranting during periods of political, economic and cultural crises because crises would besiege a community with obsessive uncertainties and anxieties. If and when extremists’ ranting assumed currency the society would experience the erosion of the foundation of tolerance without which the stability of ethnic relations would be severely tested — and might not be sustained.